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ABSTRACT

Cognitive psychology's most useful contribution to dramatic theory is the concept of schemata, or the mental structures that make up part of the perceptual cycle. In regard to an audience-oriented dramatic theory, this suggests that analysis of a script ought to identify the sorts of schemata that are to be aroused in the audience's minds and the stimuli likely to affect their arousal. Communication and cognition require that expectations be subverted in some way and at some time. One of the aims of analysis, then, is to discover where and how this happens. Among the schemata most useful to playwrights are those that use prior experience with other plays to encourage the prediction of future occurrences in the play being watched. In addition, cognitive theory emphasizes that the order in which a production presents information determines the order in which the viewer will receive it. Two other findings of cognitive psychology lending themselves to theatrical theory and practice are (1) that people perceive across sensory channels rather than in discrete compartments, allowing visual and aural stimuli to reinforce one another; and (2) the ease with which viewers perceive and retain sentences depends less on sentence length than on structure. Finally, cognitive theory permits freedom from the obligation to examine every incoming stimulus before decidng how to respond, enabling viewers to distinguish between superior scripts and productions and less worthy ones. (These points are illustrated throughout the paper with scenes from "Julius Caesar" and "Wait Until Dark.") (HOD)

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David Bratt

COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

AND

AUDIENCE-ORIENTED DRAMATIC THEORY

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First, the assumptions I am making; then some discussion of cognitive psychology with examples from two wildly dissimilar plays, JULIUS CAESAR, a Shakespearean tragedy, and WAIT UNTIL DARK, a beautifully constructed modern melodrama, happy ending variety; finally a summary of some of the features of a theory which approaches theatre from the angle I'm suggesting.

My assumptions, then. First, I assume that a theatrical production stands to audience members in a relationship of means to ends. The purpose of theatre is to affect its viewers. Whatever exactly Aristotle may have thought catharsis is, clearly it is something which happens to a viewer and which is triggered by what he sees and hears onstage. Everything else Aristotle discusses—plot, character, and all the rest—are simply the means by which that effect may be produced.

Secondly, I assume that people are not passive receptors of meaning but active participants in the search for and creation of it. Meaning does not reside in a text, waiting to be decoded or unearthed; instead, as Albert Upton says, "Meaning is what goes on in a brain when it makes a thing or a connection between two or more things." In addition, there is considerable evidence that people are hardly able to avoid making meanings: we seem to be hardwired to create order, structure, and clarity when confronted by the random or the inconsistent. (1)

And thirdly, I assume that good playwrights have always known some of the things about brain function that psychologists have only recently begun investigating: known them less systematically and more intuitively than the

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modern scientist, no doubt, but known them nevertheless and used what they have known to shape their strategies.

My approach, then, is similar to that of literary critics who practice what has been called affective stylistics; my interests are similar to those of psychologists who are of the cognitive (as opposed to behaviorist) school.

Cognitive psychology examines what happens once stimuli enter our eyes and ears and other sensory apparatus. To be sure, some of the topics, such as language development, seem of little pertinence to dramatic theory, but a good deal of cognitive psychology has to do with higher-level mental organizations and processes.

Its most useful contribution to dramatic theory is the concept of schemata (1, 9, 10). These are mental structures which make up part of the perceptual cycle. It is our schemata which direct our perceptual activity toward some of the stimuli we might pay attention to (and therefore direct us away from other stimuli). When the information has been assimilated, it may modify the schema, which then directs further explorations of the environment for additional information, which may further modify the schema, and so on.

Some schemata help us recognize words and sentences; others break down or combine unfamiliar shapes into familiar ones. Others operate on higher levels: seeing a rambunctious child, we may, depending on our background, "see" fatigue or sibling rivalry or naughtiness (1). Or seeing a smile, a dentist may gather information about tooth size, a speech clinician about lip position, and others of us about the person's mood (10). All of that information is there, but we attend to some of it and ignore some in

accordance with the dictates of the schema in which we are operating at that moment.

For instance, as I am writing these words I look at my watch, glance out my office window, and see tree branches waving in the wind against a dark and cloudy sky. Only much later do I realize that the sound of a lawn-mower has been present all the while. Why? Because it is getting to be mid-afternoon, which is when I had told the mechanic I would walk to his garage to pick up my car. In terms of that schema, the threat of rain is more pertinent than is the condition of the lawn, so I am more attuned to information about the weather.

That is to say, "perception occurs in a tuned organism. We do not simply look and listen: we look for and listen to" one thing rather than another (1). We work not on the world (the objective model) but in it, using collections of schemata and maps which we have fashioned from our prior experiences.

How are schemata formed? How do we initially select the specific map we will be using in a situation when we have few if any preconceptions or expectations? I am not sure; nor, it seems to me, are cognitive psychologists. But for one possible example, let us turn to JULIUS CAESAR.

At the very simplest level (which is where we make many initial choices), the viewer knows only that JULIUS CAESAR will likely involve someone of that name. At this same basic level, the first scene shows him a group of people confronted by two men, whose dress and anger set them apart from the celebrating group. Later stimuli let the viewer define the relationship more narrowly: confrontation or opposition is the word to describe what is going on between the two and the group, and the cause may have something to

do with Caesar and Pompey, who are each mentioned three times. The next scene gives the viewer the chance to test this hypothesis: in it we meet Caesar and see a group move on and off, applauding him, but not before two men separate themselves from it. They, too, mention Caesar—in fact, they speak of little else. Putting the scenes together, we further hypothesize that these two (Brutus and Cassius) and the two in the previous scene oppose Caesar, while the two larger groups support him. Later scenes support this hypothesis, which increases our confidence in it; they also enlarge upon the reasons for the conflict and gather more conspirators to the side of Brutus and Cassius.

This is a simple example, partly because JULIUS CAESAR is a simple play as regards its plot, but from such stimuli do we initially select schemata. (Note, too, that our choice can be aided or impeded by the visual patterns a director creates. For instance, if the visual distinction between the two pairs of men and the two larger groups is sharp, we will be more likely to be able to "see" the conflict as well as hear it, which will help us feel more confident about hypothesizing a conflict.)

The second finding of cognitive psychology especially pertinent to dramatic theory is that a schema may be modified or even discarded in favor of a more appropriate one when it becomes apparent that there is a substantial discrepancy between the stimuli we are receiving and what the schema had led us to expect we would receive. There is considerable experimental evidence of this: infants attend more to unusual sights or sounds than to ones they have become accustomed to (10), and baby chicks, made familiar with the shadow of a hawk flying over their nest, cower when seeing the same

shape pass over them backwards, and vice versa (7). There is even the P300 wave, a positive EEG spike which appears about 300 milliseconds after an unpredictable stimulus but not after a predictable one (13). Novelty triggers attention; familiarity does not.

What do these findings suggest might characterize an audience-oriented dramatic theory? First, that analysis of a script ought to identify the sorts of schemata which are to be aroused in the audience's minds and the stimuli likely to effect their arousal. Cognitive theory most resembles other kinds of approaches during this process of discovering textual strategies and trying to trace their effects. And it is also at this point that cognitive theory is most conjectural, least well buttressed by experimental evidence. It is not clear, for instance, how I select one rather than another schemata from the choices available to me; nor is it clear to what degree the schemata themselves or the mechanisms which trigger them are similar from one person to another, let alone cross-culturally or from one historical era to another. These would be valuable things to discover.

Cognitive theory is on stronger ground, however, when it comes to its next feature, that of seeking out the places and ways in which our expectations are subverted or undercut. (Notice that I do not say our expectations are met: information theory and cognitive experiments both support the notion that the total satisfaction of expectations is banal. Communication and cognition require that expectations be subverted in some way at some time (8). One of the aims of analysis, then, is to discover where and how this happens.)

As an example, consider the moment in JULIUS CAESAR when Caesar's corpse lies before us, surrounded by Brutus, Cassius, and the other

conspirators. Of all the kinds of schemata we possess, among the most useful to playwrights are those which use our prior experience with other plays to encourage us to predict future occurrences in the one we are watching now. For viewers armed with such schemata, the moments following Caesar's death are strangely unsettling. On the one hand, his murder is the promised culmination of a conflict which had been slowly drawing toward its climax ever since its introduction more than an hour earlier. Accordingly, we find it satisfying, somehow "right," because it fulfills an expectation. On the other hand, Caesar's death leaves us looking at the title character lying dead before us, knowing we have at least another hour of play ahead of us, and having no idea of how the time might be filled.

Up to this point in the production, two questions have been occupying our attention: What are the conspirators up to? and Will they succeed? Both have now been answered, which leaves us in a void, wondering where we go--indeed, where we <u>can</u> go--from here.

Notice that this is not the same as the question "What will happen next?" which can be deliciously provocative when it assumes that a limited range of things <u>can</u> happen. / Asking this easier question is like knowing more or less the direction in which we will be heading although we cannot predict the exact route we will be taking. No, at this point in JULIUS CAESAR the question is What <u>can</u> happen next? the cry of one without a map, in a vacuum.

No wonder then that we pay particularly close attention to the entrance of Antony only seconds later--Antony, whom we may remember as Caesar's friend. But because he has been kept in the background to this point, we know virtually nothing else against him; therefore we do not immediately

leap to the conclusion that he will step into Caesar's place in the conflict schema which has served us so well for more than an hour. Instead, we must wait in uncertainty until Antony's soliloquy a few moments later tells us that this is indeed his plan: he will take up the banner of his fallen friend, and the conflict schema will remain operative, with Caesar's name erased and Antony's inserted in its place. (Parenthetically, I might suggest that the gratitude we feel to Antony for restoring our sense of direction is one of the reasons we begin to admire him. Other reasons are discussed in Kenneth Burke's proto-cognitive article, "Antony in Behalf of the Play." (2))

WAIT UNTIL DARK also uses our experience with plays to affect our expectations, particularly at the final entrance of the chief villain, Roat, in II-3, after he has stabbed his erstwhile henchman. His entrance is a coup which can have its full effect only if the audience has become convinced that Roat is dead, as the henchman and heroine assume, and that the play will be finished at the end of II-2. In other words, it is essential that the audience be wrong. Performers and director can encourage this error by playing the last moments in II-2 as if the play were moving toward a rather romantic close: heroine and henchman reach a rapprochement, share a few tension-relieving laughs, and say goodbye in a stage picture reminiscent of an earlier one. When Roat then stabs him, the act will be properly chilling to the degree that it violates our expectations, which means that the production must have aroused those expectations as strongly as possible. (Again parenthetically, one of the author's few strategic blunders was his decision to compose Act II in three scenes, which will tip off any alert reader of the program to the fact that something will be following II-2.

Fortunately, II-2 and II-3 can be played without break, and the program can legitimately announce only two scenes in the act.)

So then, cognitive psychology calls for analysis aimed at unravelling the kinds of expectations (or schemata) we develop and identifying the moments and ways those expectations are reinforced or subverted. In addition, cognitive theory will emphasize the order in which a production presents information because this determines the order in which the viewer will receive it. "Sequential order is perceptual order" (5): if stimuli follow one another in time, we will perceive them one after another, which in turn will affect the nature of the expectations we develop, the affirmations we receive, the corrections we make . . . all the kinds of mental activities we go through while in the theatre.

This may sound self-evident, but most literary and theatrical criticism I've read presents its observations as if the only perceptions and integrations worth mentioning are the final ones, the ones a viewer can achieve only when the production is over. Most analyses are far more concerned with examining the terminus at which the viewer finally concludes his activity than they are with the route by which he got there. But cognitive theory emphasizes the importance of the processes in which viewers engage, the moment-by-moment experiences they have, including all their uncertainties, tentative conclusions, recognitions of miscalculations and entrapments, revised predictions, and so forth.

For instance, Stanley Fish (5) offers a sentence which illustrates the importance of process or route: "That Judas perished by hanging himself, there is no certainty in Scripture." By the time I have read the first phrase, I find myself assuming that the author believes that Judas did indeed

hang himself. Only after reading the second do I recognize that I have miscalculated (aided, of course, by the author's deliberately twisted syntax).

As Fish points out, the propositional content of this sentence is exactly the same as that of "There is no certainty in Scripture that Judas perished by hanging himself," but the experience of reading the two is very different. One trips me up; the other does not. The two call upon me to perform very different acts and therefore to undergo very different experiences as I read them. The difference in experience is a consequence of the different sequential orders in which the two sentences are organized.

I suggest that what is true of a single sentence is no less true of larger units such as speeches and scenes in a production. Further, I submit that theories which purport to deal with time-bound art forms such as theatre must do more than simply take sequential order into account: rather, they must give it a place of emphasis if they are to pay due regard to one of the essential characteristics of the art form. Accordingly, the question to ask is not so much "What does this speech or action or scene mean? but rather "What does it do? What does its placement here, at this point instead of at some other, do to a viewer's expectations?"

In this regard, a final example from JULIUS CAESAR. It seems to me that, for a variety of reasons, we have become quite disillusioned with the conspirators and are wholeheartedly enrolled on Antony's side by the end of his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech. What Shakespeare does immediately thereafter is quite extraordinary: he presents two brief scenes, the first showing Cinna the poet attacked by the mob, the second depicting the meeting between Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus. The upshot of these

scenes is that we quickly become disillusioned with Antony. Again there are many reasons: it is Antony's mob that attacks the innocent poet, the three men are callously sentencing one another's relatives to death simply to show their good faith, Antony plans to have Caesar's will tied up in the courts (the same will he had used only moments earlier to inflame the mob), and so forth.

But the fact that the viewer has twice been disillusioned, first with Brutus and Cassius and then with their opponent, Antony, is only half the story. From the point of view of cognitive theory, it is at least as important to notice <u>when</u> and <u>how quickly</u> this happens: far more speedily than it did the first time, and immediately following our attraction to Antony.

The result, I think, is that the viewer is thoroughly disoriented in his efforts to find someone in the play in whom to believe. I would argue that his experience of this disorientation is far more effective than any mere words could be—far more theatrical, more of-the-nature-of-theatre, as a way of communicating the play's vision of the world as a complex and morally uncertain place.

Let me quickly suggest two more findings of cognitive psychology which recommend themselves to theatrical theory and practice. First, people perceive across sensory channels rather than in discrete compartments. Thus it is that visual and aural stimuli can reinforce one another (which is one of theatre's primary strengths vis a vis literature), and thus it is, too, that we can perceive contradictions between them, as in the case of irony or undercutting (which is one of a director's most powerful tools).

And particularly intriguing to me is the finding that the ease with which we perceive and retain sentences depends less on their length than

on their structure. (11) "The boy hit the ball" is easier to grasp than "The ball was hit by the boy," which in turn is easier than "The ball was not hit by the boy." (The first fits the common Subject-Verb-Object schema, while the other two need to be manipulated through two or three steps in order to fit, which takes time and effort.) Is it possible that a long but relatively straightforward play like PEER GYNT is easier to grasp than a shorter but somehow more complicated, more baroque, Shakespearean script or a relentlessly unchronological one? Complexity may depend not only on the sheer number of stimuli presented but also on their order, which will determine the number and sophistication of the schemata we must construct in order to structure the experience.

Finally, let me suggest a couple of further benefits of cognitive theory. One of the more important (if you are an assimilationist) is that cognitive theory can serve as an overarching framework into which other approaches may be placed and from which vantage points they can contribute their particular insights. It seems to me that Rezeptionsästhetik and phenomenological criticism fit most easily alongside cognitive theory, but others do, too. Semiotic and structuralist theory, for instance, may bear on the formation and nature of schemata; those features of the text which interest rhetoricians may be among the ways we are influenced to choose and modify and discard schemata; and psychological theory is related to the sorts of conclusions we may reach at the end of the experience. (However, this sort of framework is possible only if one accepts the assumptions with which I began, particularly the one which claims that meaning is something viewers create, not something residing in the text.)

Finally, like many other approaches, cognitive theory is value-laden: it suggests qualities by which superior scripts and productions may be distinguished from less worthy ones. To understand what those qualities are, we should first note that schemata are very much a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they make life possible; on the other, they make adventure difficult. (13) Using them frees us from the obligation to examine every incoming stimulus before deciding how to respond; at the same time, they discourage spontaneity and flexibility by resisting change, even to the point of influencing us to distort and delete stimuli in our efforts to maintain the illusion that the particluar schema we are using is adequate.

In this connection, it has been suggested that establishing a memory trace increases the sensitivity of the synapses along a particular neural pathway, with the result that a new stimulus is most likely to take an already existing path—that is, to be treated in a standardized, stereotypical fashion. (16) The brain has been compared to a mound of jello which has had hot water poured onto its peak, drop by drop, each drop helping to carve tracks down the slope. The result is that each successive drop is increasingly likely to take an already existing track and carve it deeper rather than begin cutting a new one. In time, the mind becomes a relatively small collection of very deep ruts. (4)

This image suggests that a good play is one which will not fit into the old ruts. Resisting our efforts to force it into familiar schemata, it requires us to exert ourselves to modify them or even create new ones. A good play carves new pathways.

Good plays, good jokes, and challenging problems have at least one thing in common: they deviate from our expectations and require us to devise

new schemata into which the information they give us can be integrated. And, at least in my experience, at the conclusion of good plays, good jokes, and successfully solved problems, one feels the exhilaration which leads to what has been called the "smile of recognitory assimilation." (7)

We do not solve challenging problems by employing relationships which have been memorialized in well-established mental schemata. We solve them by constructing new relationships to suit the needs of the moment. (9) From the point of view of cognitive dramatic theory, good plays are mental exercises, practice for more spontaneous and flexible living.

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